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FOREIGN POLICY CONTINUITY: WAR FINDS US

Lawrence Kaplan

In recent months, a chorus has emerged to blame (or credit) President Barack Obama for sustaining many of the signature national security policies of his predecessor, President George W. Bush. Yet anyone puzzled by the similarities between the foreign and defense policies of Presidents Bush and Obama would do well to cast a glance backward, for this is hardly the first time we have heard such complaints.

During the Cold War, and even before, a revisionist critique of American national security policy gained traction on the political left and, in some instances, among conservatives as well (interwar isolationists on the right, for example). Writers and historians like Charles Beard and, during the Vietnam-era in particular, William Appleman Williams and Walter LaFeber, offered up relentless denunciations of policymakers who, as Williams put it in his classic book, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, “defined safety in terms of conquest—or at any rate domination.” Far from chalking up this propensity to current events, the revisionist school traced a pattern of American militarism all the way back to the nation’s founding. Thusly defined, it did not matter who presided over U.S. foreign policy. The revisionists insisted, with a Marxian tinge, that America’s foreign and military policies operated on autopilot.

Prosperity, idealism, open markets, consumption, geopolitical heft, sheer avarice—the revisionists did not always agree on what accounted for the continuities in U.S. foreign policy, but they did agree that almost nothing would budge its course. With respect to the post-war era, their analyses do not stand the test of time. They fundamentally misread and misconstrued the foundation of U.S. national security policy from 1947 to 1990, attributing far greater significance to America’s supposed appetite for expansion than it deserved, and all but ignoring the thermonuclear contest in which the United States had become trapped. Nearly without exception, what animated U.S. policy during those years was not a belief that sustaining American prosperity required opening (or conquering) markets, but rather the straightforward threat of war with the Soviet Union.

Yet, however much they bungled their reading of American motives and conduct during these years, the revisionists did get one thing right: From 1947 through the end of the Cold War, American national security policy, as enshrined in NSC-68, seldom varied. Among presidents and policymakers, there were no fundamental arguments

about first principles. The changes, when they did come (during the first few years of the Carter administration, for example), happened around the edges. As often as not, even these were reversed (the final 2 years of the Carter administration). The reason was simple: As Abraham Lincoln wrote to a friend in 1864, "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me." That is, the world around them allowed presidents less room to maneuver than their own rhetoric suggested. Again, President Carter could declare the Cold War over, but that did not make it so. As a result of the Soviet threat, and seen in retrospect, American policy boiled down to variations on the same theme, not two fundamentally distinct sets of policies.

This brings us to the many overlaps between the national security policies of Presidents Bush and Obama. Despite the Obama team's early promises to break with the policies of their predecessors, nearly every day brings a headline suggesting the reverse. Last year's eagerness to engage with Iran has given way to a policy "tough enough to actually change behavior," in the president's words. Last year's linguistic cleansing of the phrase "war on terror" has been supplanted by a national security team (including the previous administration's defense secretary) that speaks routinely of a nation at war and which is "surging" more troops into Afghanistan than President Bush controversially surged into Iraq in 2007—even as it steps up aerial attacks in neighboring Pakistan. The Obama team's timetable for withdrawing from Iraq all but mirrors President Bush's. The administration's defense budget is the highest ever. Russia, China, Taiwan, the Gulf States—the initial distancing from President Bush's defense priorities in these places, where not closed entirely, have been reduced to a cosmetic gap.

Where all this leads is clear. The war on terror, or whatever phrase one prefers, will constrain American national security policy as much or even more than the Cold War did (*détente*, containment, and the panoply of other tools used to deter the Soviet Union simply do not apply to al-Qaeda). Regardless of their own preferences, future presidential administrations will be presented with challenges that they could hardly have anticipated, and to which they will be obliged to respond. The United Nations will not be able to. Europe will not be able to. Either the United States will respond, or no one will.

This is not to say that Washington needs no grand strategy, or that it ought to contend with challenges on a case-by-case basis. Quite the contrary, candor and paying due respect to reality means acknowledging that a mere change of presidential administration will not sweep up the legacy of the past 4 years, much less the past century. There will be no respite at home because there will be no respite abroad. This is a burden that will shackle the next administration and the one after that, and it will have profound and lasting consequences for America's defense establishment, which is unlikely to shrink anytime soon. To paraphrase one of the founding fathers of our last foe, Leon Trotsky, Americans may not be interested in war, but war is most certainly interested in them.

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